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SUBJECT: [OPPOSITION](#) AND HUMAN RIGHTS THIS WEEK IN ST. PETERSBURG

REF: ST. PETERSBURG 189

11. SUMMARY. St. Petersburg was the scene of another Dissenters March December 14, conducted mostly peacefully, but well outside the city center and under control of overwhelming security forces. Some 60 persons were arrested. Human Rights Day December 10 was marked by dueling conferences - one organized by NGOs and another by the City Administration. Authorities have returned some materials to Memorial, but not computer drives or the most important documents which were confiscated December 4. Memorial is suing over the raid. END SUMMARY.

Dissenters Protest

12. (SBU) In the face of a daunting security presence, some 400 Petersburgers participated in the Dissenter's March/Rally December 14 according to Pol / Econ Off eyewitness estimates. Participants spoke out against the constitutional change extending the presidential term as well as against government intimidation of civil society.

13. (SBU) Organizers had been denied permission by city authorities to hold a march, and were instead given permission to hold only a stationary rally at a park some two miles from the city center. Many rally participants nonetheless set off for the event from central Nevskiy Prospekt, walking to the location of the rally itself. To ensure compliance with the city's regulations, the participants walked the distance between the sites on the sidewalks and without signs, placards, or sloganeering. The route and the rally itself were heavily covered by some 1,000 uniformed police, OMON special forces and plainclothes personnel who appeared to be waiting for any sort of provocation from the participants so they could begin their crackdown. Some 60 would-be participants were reportedly detained for minor infractions.

14. (SBU) The streets between the meeting site and the rally had groups of security personnel along the entire way, so it was very evident to participants that they were under the eye of the authorities. The park where the rally was held was cordoned off such that ingress and egress to it was limited to only two gates, where several dozen security personnel were posted, brandishing clubs, and sporadically checking participants' bags and identification.

While Rights Groups Confer

15. (SBU) On December 10, the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, several of the most prominent human rights NGOs were represented at a conference held at the St. Petersburg office of the Soldiers' Mothers Organization. Among the topics of discussion were rights violations affecting the most vulnerable groups of population: draftees, prison inmates and non-Slavs; the problems of refugees and migrants' rights and difficulties with legalization of the former citizens of the Soviet Union and others left stranded by its 1991 collapse. Activists estimate that between one and three million Russian

Federation residents holding Soviet passports have no official Russian documents. Children of those people also become "illegal." Of about 3,000 members of the St. Petersburg Afghan community (mainly refugees from the Taliban regime), only 300 have official status. The ongoing clampdown on press freedom, and the financial failure of the liberal weekly Delo, has reduced the number of independent newspapers in St. Petersburg to three: Novaya Gazeta, Moy Rayon and the English-language St. Petersburg Times. Corruption was cited as endemic and increasing.

¶6. (SBU) Meanwhile, across town, the Smolnyy City Administration held a human rights conference of its own, mostly theoretical or celebratory in nature. Problems, to the extent that they were discussed, were limited mostly to fairly non-controversial issues, such as tolerance and access to health care. A hard-hitting presentation from a Soldiers Mothers speaker, the only one at the conference directly critical of the authorities, was treated to a chilly reception.

And Memorial Goes to Court

¶7. (SBU) Memorial, whose St. Petersburg research center was raided December 4, has filed suit for the return of its materials and damages. Some of the center's papers have been returned, but not its all-important eleven computer drivers. The group was grateful for the Consulate General's and Department's support.

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